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GRASSROOTS ON COMMON GROUND

Student-powered initiatives are a wellspring of DePaul's deeply embedded commitment to social justice

By Craig Keller



Chicago Area Peace Action-
DePaul holding a past voter
registration drive on campus

The ways in which DePaul students pursue social justice are both diverse and intersectional. From established groups to more recent initiatives, such efforts reflect the community uplift at the heart of DePaul's Vincentian mission and how the university has long been a driving force for social justice. While the COVID-19 pandemic has altered or paused parts of these efforts, those behind them continue to march forward with hope and conviction.

COMMUNITY PEACEMAKERS

"For the young folks out there, I challenge you to take a risk. Dream about everything that's possible for your life. Dream about bettering the lives of people around you. Dream about the need to build a better world. Dream, lead and take action."

The late **Frankie Valencia (LAS '10)** spoke those words in his keynote speech at the President's Annual Diversity Brunch in 2009. Valencia was a popular mentor to other students and a Vincentian in Action student leader who, among many leadership roles, mentored youth at San Miguel School on the West Side of Chicago. Tragically, Valencia was shot and killed at a Halloween party that year on the verge of graduating. He was granted his degree posthumously.

In 2011, DePaul's University Ministry (now the Division of Mission and Ministry) launched its Community Peacemakers program to honor Valencia and respond to gun violence among Chicago youth. Each academic year since then, DePaul students train in restorative justice practices during the fall quarter, then pair up with high school classrooms in Chicago Public Schools the following winter and spring.

During the 14-week program, participants gather in peace circles while facilitators guide the groups through conversations and activities about community- and trust-building, what nonviolence looks like and means in each person's life, and how compassionate dialogue and community care are more effective than disciplinary actions in not perpetuating more harm, among other topics.

"Everyone in the peace circle has a voice and deserves to contribute equally," says DePaul junior Olivia Hamer, one of the program's student coordinators. "We shed the traditional power dynamic that someone with closer proximity to higher, private education knows more, because the people who participate are the experts about their communities. We focus on how they're the agents of change for themselves and where they live."

The program concludes with classes creating a peace project related to their discussions. Examples have included open mics, community service days and a self-care fair with uplifting activity booths.

Collective care also informed the online peace circles facilitators held for fellow DePaul students in spring 2020 after the COVID-19 pandemic curtailed school visits. Those continued this academic year while the partnership is being evaluated in light of health and safety guidelines.



Community Peacemakers facilitators guide high schoolers in a past peace circle.

"It's important to maintain empowerment in community, especially when things seem so heavy, and the world's problems so immense," says Gina Leal, the program's staff coordinator. "When people have a shared space for reflection, they begin to see the only way we can imagine a better world is by coming together and everyone doing their small piece. That's more sustainable than someone trying to carry the world's burdens on their shoulders."

STUDENTS AGAINST INCARCERATION

Hamer is also a vice president of Students Against Incarceration (SAI), an activist group founded in 2016 by community service studies students involved in DePaul's Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, in which students and inmates at Stateville Correctional Center and Cook County Jail take classes together taught by DePaul faculty. SAI involves its members, who, like secondary education undergraduate Hamer, now come from across the university, in actions related to criminal justice reform and prison abolition.

SAI members have collaborated with grassroots coalition Parole Illinois to call attention to an Illinois Senate bill that would reestablish a discretionary parole system for individuals serving long-term sentences. They've worked with Chicago Votes, a youth organization providing political and public service leadership training, on an initiative to inform incarcerated people of their eligibility to vote.

The group has also held teach-ins on campus about various related issues and organized a book group at Cook County Jail during which students met weekly with inmates and brought them dictionaries donated in a collection drive they organized.

When Cook County Jail became a COVID-19 hot spot last spring, SAI worked with the Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison on a crowdsourcing campaign to purchase thousands of travel-size bars of soap for inmates. SAI also collaborated with other DePaul student groups on a Ban the Box campaign to call for the removal of a check box on college applications that asks if applicants have a criminal record.

“More than just a support, we’re also learning ourselves and making sure we’re caught up with current issues, because we’re not the ones inside the prisons,” says Hamer. “We want to make sure we’re doing right by the people who are.”

CHICAGO AREA PEACE ACTION-DEPAUL

“Everything we do is to make our community stronger, healthier and safer,” says Grace Siegelman, co-president of the three-year-old Chicago Area Peace Action (CAPA)—DePaul.

CAPA, headquartered in Evanston, Ill., began as the North Shore Peace Initiative in 1978 to promote the nuclear freeze movement. Peace Action, CAPA’s national parent organization, traces its activist roots to protests against nuclear weapons testing during the Cold War. Today, regional and student chapters advocate for global cooperation on foreign policy issues related to war, the nuclear threat, poverty, climate change and terrorism.

“We’re a community-building group dedicated to finding peaceful ways to combat capitalism, imperialism and the injustices we see every day, such as voter suppression and mass incarceration,” says Siegelman. She says that the group’s diversity broadens its focuses, resources and collaborations with expert advisors and fellow activist organizations, such as DePaul’s SAI, Students for Justice in Palestine and CAPA chapters at Loyola University and the University of Illinois.

CAPA’s availability to students as a resource with deep experience in activist strategy is reassuring, says Siegelman.

“CAPA’s leadership and members guide us and provide a national and global picture of where they’re putting their efforts,” says Siegelman, a senior majoring in peace studies and conflict resolution. “They’ll ask, ‘Can we educate you on the subject? Can we see you at these events? And can you co-sponsor this one and tie it into your own message?’”

On DePaul’s campus, in addition to voter registration drives, the chapter has held teach-ins and info fairs about voter suppression and rights, the war and humanitarian crisis in Yemen, and controversial policies enforced by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. A panel and group discussion on climate change included DePaul faculty and drew representatives from environmental groups across the Chicago metro area.

“We’re just explaining the issues and educating the public,” says Siegelman, “and sharing what we can do as community members to combat injustices.”

Interacting remotely during the pandemic hasn’t derailed such efforts. The chapter prioritized social media engagement this past October 12–16 for its annual Action Week, which called attention to different causes and ways to support them each day. Actions targeted the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, mass clemency in Illinois, disinvestment in companies that profit from military interventions and the global arms trade, and clean-energy technologies to combat climate change.

“We’re not only doing this for what we believe in, but because other people in our community are counting on us as well,” says Siegelman.



Students Against Incarceration members advocate for prison-to-college pathways.

“There’s so much love and support for everything we do together, and that makes it even more important.”

THE WOMEN’S CENTER

Compassion and interconnectedness are also core tenets of DePaul’s Women’s Center, where transformative justice is pursued in the form of support circles, healing practice and difficult dialogue sessions and community-building events.

The Women’s Center, located in the Student Center on the Lincoln Park Campus, was created in 1995 under the Office of Academic Affairs to provide women students, staff, faculty and administrators with co-curricular programs, advocacy and support. Now overseen by the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (LAS) in association with the Women’s and Gender Studies (WGS) Department, the center still hosts academic programs, but has expanded its rejuvenative support services under Ann Russo, its director and a WGS professor.

When Russo became director in 2017, she opened up the center physically and socially. Out went the office furniture; in came a communal table, couches and chairs where people with different identities, experiences and perspectives can gather to support one another, share their different stories and struggles, and organize for social change at DePaul and beyond.

“Women’s issues sometimes get pretty narrowly defined,” says Russo. “It’s important to realize women don’t represent one community, and people more broadly can be queer or trans and not identify as women. How do we build connections across the many differences within and beyond this idea of women?”

The support circles, currently being facilitated online, are one answer. Similar to those used in the Community Peacemakers program, they’re inspired by communal justice rituals practiced and shared by Indigenous people in Canada’s Upper Yukon. They include body movement, guided meditation, and meaningful objects brought by participants and passed around clockwise as each person is given the opportunity to talk.

Initially, the circles primarily served people who’d experienced sexual assault, but they have since broadened to include “anybody who’s been impacted by oppression or violence, including sexual assault, but also racist harassment or racialized assault or homophobia or transphobia,” says Russo.

The center also offers half-hour, healing-practice workshops, now offered online, that teach self-care and coping with stress or trauma through mindfulness techniques.

Many participants and facilitators, such as Women's Center staff member **Nina Wilson (LAS '20)**, are involved in social justice work and movements. They use restorative practices to manage the stress of their efforts and extend the practices' impact by sharing them with other movement workers, friends and family.

Wilson, a graduate student in the WGS program, has worked with the Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network through the Women's Center and is pursuing a career in sexual assault and domestic violence prevention. As a DePaul undergraduate she directed a production of "The Vagina Monologues," with ticket sales benefiting domestic violence prevention organizations, and served as a peer health educator for the Office of Health Promotion and Wellness, assisting with sexual assault prevention training and awareness events.

"As a person who has experienced sexual violence myself," shares Wilson, "I've found it important to do what I can for folks in similar situations who run around, not knowing what to do or how to heal themselves."

At Dandelions in the Concrete, a quarterly Women's Center event on hiatus this year that Wilson helps organize, members of marginalized communities can express themselves exuberantly and safely through creative programming that celebrates resistance, including open-mic stories, poems and songs, arts and crafts, and social justice activities such as healing circles.

"It's about building community within the DePaul community for those who are struggling to find one," says Wilson.

The Women's Center's community-building also takes place with LAS's Center for Black Diaspora (CBD), founded in 1993, through co-hosted events exploring the intersection of race, gender, class and sexuality.

A Healing, Justice and Dialogue Series held online during the 2020–21 academic year included presentations by activist, civil rights attorney, writer and scholar Fania Davis and Rev. angel Kyodo williams, a Black Zen Buddhist priest, social justice practitioner and founder of the Center for Transformative Change in Berkeley, Calif. DePaul students also participated in a letter-writing workshop with Love & Protect, a collective supporting women and gender nonconforming/nonbinary people of color criminalized or harmed by state and interpersonal violence.

CBD Director Julie Moody-Freeman also recognized early on how COVID-19 was disproportionately affecting Black communities and organized a Black Public Health in the Era of COVID-19 online presentation series. "We incorporate these events into the curriculum, and they allow students to feel part of a broader community and learn ways they can help," says Moody-Freeman.

DEPAUL ALLIANCE FOR LATINX EMPOWERMENT

Building community by celebrating identities often sidelined is also the shared purpose of DePaul's many cultural student groups. The DePaul Alliance for Latinx Empowerment (DALE), founded in the late 1980s as United Hispanics, has been such a role model for more than 30 years.

"Empowerment comes in many different ways," says Camila Barrientos, DALE's president and a junior in Latin American and Latino Studies and political science. "We try to give students a home away from home. We understand that college is very difficult for a lot of folks, especially those who identify as Latinx. Many are first-generation, and their families don't understand the process of college. So, we try to give them that base and those welcoming arms."

DALE also acknowledges in its constitution that Latinx covers a spectrum of races, including Indigenous and Black people who've been oppressed in "so-called Latin America," says Barrientos.

The group's empowerment efforts comprise academic advice, career development opportunities and social functions. DALE cultivates many volunteer opportunities, internships and scholarships for members through its close relationship with the United States Hispanic Leadership Institute, a Chicago-based organization that helps train the next generation of Latinx leaders through community service and activist programs.

Such guidance also comes from within DALE's ranks. Every meeting includes an educational report by members who have researched or experienced an issue affecting the Latinx community. Examples include the impact of the first federal pandemic-related stimulus package on undocumented immigrants and a firsthand account by executive board member Juliana Zanubis of abuses suffered by fruit farm workers in her native Colombia.

Members unable to attend can catch up with the "Spanglish with DALE" podcast, available in Apple's app store and SoundCloud. Past episodes have featured discussions and interviews with experts on such topics as gaining more Latinx representation in the corporate financial sector and policies affecting educational disparities in Chicago Public Schools.

Outside campus, DALE engages its members in community service activities such as helping to build homes with Habitat for Humanity in neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side. DALE's social events, currently on hold, also include educational components. At past Día de los Muertos celebrations during Latinx Heritage Month, members have taught guests about calaveras (decorative and edible representations of skulls) and the ofrendas (ancestral altars) on which they're often displayed.

"People are so commonly miseducated on Latin American countries, and that includes a lot of Latinx folks for whom college is an awakening. We decided it's up to us to rewrite these narratives," says Barrientos. "When you come to college, it helps to preserve your roots with others who look like you, reconnect and build our community together. To take care of one another properly, which is what DePaul is all about, right?"

DePaul Alliance for Latinx Empowerment's Camila Barrientos

